

Message Text

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 02004 01 OF 02 251739Z
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E.O. 11652: GDS
TAGS: PFOR, SY, IS, US, PLO, XF
SUBJECT: BILATERAL SYRO-ISRAELI AGREEMENT COULD BE FIRST STAGE
EN ROUTE TO GENEVA--IF ONLY SYRIA AGREES

1. SUMMARY:

IT MAY PROVE DIFFICULT TO MAINTAIN PRESENT DEGREE OF
UNITY AMONG ARAB MODERATES IF PREPARATIONS FOR GENEVA CON-
FERENCE ARE PROLONGED. IF ARABS COULD AGREE THAT WORKING
FOR OVERALL AGREEMENT ON ONE FRONT WAS USEFUL COURSE TO
PURSUE EN ROUTE GENEVA, SUCH A NEGOTIATIONS MIGHT BE RELATIVELY
QUICKLY LAUNCHED. AMONG THE SEVERAL POSSIBLE ARAB NEGOTIATORS,
SYRIA OFFERS CERTAIN ADVANTAGES. SYRIAN BILATERAL NEGOTIA-
TIONS WOULD GIVE ASAD A SPECIAL INCENTIVE TO RESHAPE THE
PLO INTO A MORE ACCEPTABLE BODY FOR FUTURE INVOLVEMENT
IN THE PEACE PROCESS. SOVIETS MIGHT BE ATTRACTED BY
PROSPECT OF SUPPORTING SYRIAN NEGOTIATIONS SINCE ITS
POSITION HERE REMAINS MORE IMPORTANT RELATIVE TO WHAT IT HAS
IN EGYPT. WERE ASAD TO ACCEPT TO ENGAGE IN BILATERAL
NEGOTIATIONS, HOWEVER, IT WOULD ONLY BE WITH THE ACTIVE
BACKING OF HIS ARAB COLLEAGUES; WE CANNOT BE CONFIDENT HE EVEN
THEN WOULD DO SO. END SUMMARY

2. OUR UNDERSTANDING OF THE USG SCENARIO FOR THE ARAB- SECRET

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PAGE 02 DAMASC 02004 01 OF 02 251739Z

ISRAELI PEACE PROCESS IS THAT WE ARE WORKING TO CONVENE
GENEVA IN THE LATTER HALF OF 1977. ON THE EVE OF MEETINGS
BETWEEN PRESIDENT CARTER AND THE MODERATE ARAB LEADERS,
IT IS TOO EARLY TO PREDICT WITH CONFIDENCE HOW LONG IT
WILL TAKE TO RESOLVE OUTSTANDING PROCEDURAL ISSUES BEFORE
GENEVA CAN BE CONVENED. OUR PRELIMINARY READING OF PNC
CONFERENCE RESULTS IS THAT ARAFAT GAVE UP GROUND TO THE

REJECTIONISTS, IN RETURN PERHAPS PRESERVING SOME AREA OF FREEDOM TO NEGOTIATE TERMS OF PLO PARTICIPATION IN GENEVA. TIME WILL TELL WHETHER HIS "FREEDOM" PROVES ILLUSORY. UNLESS THE PLO OVER THE NEXT FEW MONTHS ON ITS OWN OR UNDER ARAB PRESSURE, DEVELOPS A MORE FLEXIBLE POSTURE TOWARDS ISRAEL'S RIGHT TO EXIST, IT MAY BE HARD TO FIND WAY TO INVITE PLO TO GENEVA. PNC CONFERENCE MAY THUS HAVE CREATED A FURTHER OBSTACLE TO RECONVENING GENEVA FOR SYRIA, WHOSE PRESENT STACNE IS THAT IT WILL ATTEND GENEVA WITHOUT THE PLO ONLY IF THAT ORGANIZATION IS INVITED AND REFUSES TO ATTEND.

3. WE ARE CONCERNED THAT ONCE THE GOI HAS COMPLETED ITS MID-MAY ELECTIONS, TENSIONS WILL BUILD UP RATHER QUICKLY IN THE ARAB RANKS IN EXPECTATION OF SPEEDY PROGRESS IN THE PEACE PROCESS. THIS IN TURN COULD LEAD TO BREAK-DOWN OF PRESENT CLOSE COOPERATION BETWEEN CONFRONTATION STATES AND SAUDI ARABIA. (THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP FOR ONE IS KEENLY AWARE OF THE FRAGILITY OF THE PRESENT DEGREE OF ARAB UNITY. FONMIN KHADDAM TOLD A RECENT VISITOR THAT BY THE FRACE OF GOD, JANUARY'S RIOTS HAD BROKEN OUT IN EGYPT RATHER THAN SYRIA.) IF THE RELATIVELY UNITED FRONT PREVAILING TODAY SPLITS, THIS COULD EITHER PARALYZE THE PEACE PROCESS OR PROMPT SADAT ONCE AGAIN TO GET OUT IN FRONT SEEKING A FURTHER SETTLEMENT FOR EGYPT. STAGNATION WILL NOT ONLY THREATEN INTER-RAB COORDINATION BUT ALSO THE UNACKNOWLEDGED BUT REAL PERCEPTION OF A PARTIAL CONVERGENCE OF SYRO-ISRAELI INTERESTS FORGED BY THEIR INVOLVEMENT IN LEBANON LAST YEAR.

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PAGE 03 DAMASC 02004 01 OF 02 251739Z

4. WE SUBMIT THERE MAY BE WAY BOT TO TAKE QUICKER ADVANTAGE OF PRESENT MOOD OF ARAB MODERATES TO COORDINATE CLOSELY WITH ONE ANOTHER BESIDES PREPARING TO MOVE DIRECTLY TT GENEVA AND STILL NOT FORECLOSE ITS EVENTUAL OPENING. THIS WOULD BE TO WORK FOR ACHIEVING AN OVER-ALL AGREEMENT ON ONE FRONT. IN CONSIDERING THIS ALTERNATIVE, DAMASCUS COULD WELL BE THE BEST PROSPECT FOR AN ISRAELI NEGOTIATING PARTNER RATHER THAN THE PERHAPS SUPERFICIALLY EASIER CHOCIES OF EITHER EGYPT OR JORDAN. SHOULD EGYPT BREAK RANKS AND AGAIN MOVE INTO UNILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS, THIS WOULD PREDICTABLY LEAD TO REPETITION OF THE RECRIMINATIONS WHICH SURROUNDED SINAI II AND DISRUPT FUTURE SETTLEMENT EFFORTS. FOR ITS PART, JORDAN APPEARS TO BE FROZEN IN ITS SELF-PROTECTING COMMITMENT TO THE RABAT PRINCIPLE THAT SINCE THE PLO IS THE SOLE REPRESENTATIVE OF THE PALESTINIANS, AMMAN WILL NOT NEGOTIATE STATUS OF THE WEST BANK UNLESS (AND PERHAPS EVEN IF) REQUESTED TO DO SO BY THE PRINCIPAL ARAB STATES.

5. WE CANNOT ASSERT THAT ASAD WOULD ACCEPT TO ENTER UNILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS. WERE HE TO DO SO, IT WOULD ONLY BE IF HE HAD ACTIVE EGYPTIAN, SAUDI AND JORDANIAN BACKING AND AT LEAST PLO ACQUIESCENCE. EVEN THEN, IT WOULD NOT BE EASY TO CONVINCE ASAD TO ENGAGE. HE IS NOT AS HARD PRESSED FOR A BREAKTHROUGH AS SADAT AND MIGHT WELL CONSIDER THE APPROACH TOO RISKY FOR SYRIA. (FOR ALL THE COMMENTS BY THE SYRIAN LEADERSHIP DOWNPLAYING THE EFFECT OF CRITICISM OF SYRIA BY BAGHDAD, FOR EXAMPLE, THEIR SENSITIVITY TO IRAQI ATTACKS ILLUSTRATES THEIR SENSE OF VULNERABILITY.) IF THE ARABS AGREED TO BACK A SYRO-ISRAELI NEGOTIATION, HOWEVER, IT COULD HAVE THREE PRINCIPLE ADVANTAGES. FIRST, THE ARAB MODERATE LEADERS HAVE THE MOST SYMPATHETIC AUDIENCE IN U.S. PUBLIC AND CONGRESSIONAL OPINION AND WOULD BE ABLE TO PLAY A ROLE WITHIN THE U.S. SUPPORTIVE OF THE ISRAELI-SYRIAN NEGOTIATIONS. IN TURN, THE ARAB LEADERS COULD BE SURE THAT IN ASAD THEY WOULD
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SECRET

PAGE 04 DAMASC 02004 01 OF 02 251739Z

BE SUPPORTING A NEGOTIATOR WHO WOULD BE HIGHLY UNEASY AT BEING OUT IN FRONT. THEY COULD BE CONFIDENT HE WOULD APPLY MAXIMUM PRESSURE ON THE PALESTINIANS, AIMED EITHER AT GETTING THEM TO MODIFY THEIR DEMANDS OR TO STAND ASIDE AND LET ISSUES INVOLVING EGYPT AND JORDAN BE TACKLED FIRST. THIRDLY, IF AGREEMENT WITH SYRIA COULD BE OBTAINED, AGREEMENT WITH OTHER ARAB PARTIES SHOULD BE FACILITATED.

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PAGE 01 DAMASC 02004 02 OF 02 251759Z
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SECRET SECTION 2 OF 2 DAMASCUS 2004

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6. ISRAEL:

WE ASSUME ANY FORESEEABLE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT WILL PREFER BILATERAL TO MULTILATERAL NEGOTIATIONS. GAD YAACOBI'S PREDICTION THAT ATTEMPT AT ANY OVERALL MIDDLE EAST SETTLEMENT WILL FAIL AND BE SUCCEEDED BY A RETURN TO STEP-BY-STEP DIPLOMACY SEEMS WIDELY SHARED IN ISRAEL. (TEL AVIV 2022). A SYRO-ISRAELI AGREEMENT WOULD COVER ONLY ONE FRONT BUT THE PRINCIPLES IT ESTABLISHED WOULD BE APPLICABLE TO ALL. SOME AMBIGUITY IN DESCRIBING THE GOAL OF SUCH A NEGOTIATION MIGHT BE PRACTICED. SYRIA WOULD LIKELY ARGUE THAT AN AGREEMENT IT REACHED WITH ISRAEL WOULD ESTABLISH GENERAL PRINCIPLES; ISRAELI MIGHT AFFIRM THAT FUTURE NEGOTIATIONS OVER SINAI AND WEST BANK WOULD NOT BE PREJUDGED BY AN AGREEMENT ON GOLAND.

7. SOVIETS:

MOSCOW RETAINS A RELATIVELY MORE IMPORTANT FOOTHOLD IN SYRIA THAN IT DOES IN EGYPT AND CERTAINLY IN JORDAN. IF MOSCOW'S BASIC CONCERN IS HAVING A ROLE TO PLAY AND NOT NECESSARILY PLAYING IT IN GENEVA, IT MIGHT FIND ATTRACTIVE THE PROSPECT OF SUPPORTING ITS "BEST FRIEND" AMONG THE CONFRONTATION STATES IN AN OVERALL SYRO-ISRAELI AGREEMENT. SOVIET SUPPORT COULD BE USEFUL IN CONTAINING RADICAL
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PAGE 02 DAMASC 02004 02 OF 02 251759Z

ARAB CRITICISM OF SYRIA.

8. SHOULD DEPARTMENT FIND MERIT IN THIS APPROACH, QUESTION ARISES AS TO WHEN IT SHOULD BE BROACHED TO THE VARIOUS ARAB LEADERS. IT MIGHT BE POSSIBLE TO ASKE EACH ARAB LEADER DURING THEIR MEETINGS WITH PRESIDENT CARTER THE NON-SPECIFIC QUESTION WHETHER SEEKING AN OVERALL AGREEMENT ON ONE FRONT WOULD BE A POSSIBLE WAY TO PROCEED TO GENEVA, GIVEN THE DIFFICULTIES WITH THE PALESTINIAN ISSUE, WITHOUT INDICATING WE HAD ANY ONE ARAB STATE IN MIND. ALTERNATIVELY, IT MAY BE PREFERABLE TO DEFER EVEN THIS GENERAL QUESTION UNTIL AFTER THE ISRAELI ELECTIONS AND OUR NEXT ROUND OF TOP LEVEL CONTACTS WITH THE ARAB STATES.

9. IN SUM, THE APPEAL TO US OF A SYRO-ISRAELI NEGOTIATION IS THAT IF ALL CONCERNED VIEW IT AS LESS OF A RISK THAN A POSSIBLY PROLONGED PROCEDURAL WRANGLE, IT COULD HELP THE PARTIES STAY ON COURSE DURING A PERIOD OF PREDICTABLE FRUSTRATION AS ARRANGEMENTS FOR GENEVA ARE WORKED OUT. WE RECOGNIZE THERE IS GRAVE RISK INVOLVED IN THIS PROPOSAL; IT COULD PREJUDICE CONVENING A COMPREHENSIVE CONFERENCE BY STIMULATING ARAB SUSPICIONS. IF ASAD WERE AGREEABLE,

HOWEVER, IT WOULD ENGAGE THE HERETOFORE MOST UNBENDING
CONFRONTATION STATE, SYRIA, AND CREATE A DYNAMIC WHICH WOULD
STIMULATE IT TO PUSH FOR FURTHER PROGRESS AFTER ITS OWN
BILATERAL NEGOTIATION. IT WOULD BE CONSONANT WITH THE
APPARENT TREND IN ISRAELI THINKING AND POSSIBLY ATTRACT
USEFUL SOVIET SUPPORT. FINALLY, IT COULD PROVIDE A REASTNABLE
JUSTIFICATION TO SET ASIDE THE ISSUE OF PALESTINIAN
PARTICIPATION AND SIMULTANEOUSLY FOCUS ARAB ENERGIES
ON RESHAPING THE PLO.
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